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SUBJECT: JAMAICA: MARCH POLITICAL ROUNDUP

REF: A. 07 KINGSTON 1301

1B. KINGSTON 277

1C. KINGSTON 263

1D. 07 KINGSTON 1336

1E. 07 KINGSTON 1803

Summary

11. (SBU) The current Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) led government continues to press forward, albeit at a snail's pace. When the JLP released their manifesto, during the campaign for the national elections last summer, it was full of promises for innovations and reform proposals (Ref A). Now, with no relief in sight for rising prices, falling exchange rates, near record crime rates, and the distraction of implementing their first budget as a ruling party in almost 20 years, the JLP faces many obstacles.

Early Promises Kept

12. (U) Since Prime Minister Bruce Golding (PM Golding) led the JLP to victory in September 2007, there has been progress on some fronts. Most notably in the promises of free tuition at public primary and secondary schools, and starting on April 1, free basic access to health care at government hospitals and clinics. What remains to be seen is how well this implementation is undertaken, whether the budget will be able to continue to support these institutions without the help of user fees, and whether or not the people of Jamaica are really getting valuable service from these government institutions. However, recent success in tax collection, including extensive media coverage of prominent citizens brought before the court to explain their tax arrears, are a positive sign that the budget may be able to provide the necessary funding for key programs (Ref B).

13. (U) The abolition of school tuition fees was a key JLP election promise and was widely promoted in the media in the run-up to the election. Thus it was unsurprising, especially since the election took place right before the start of the new school year, that the JLP was quick to act on it. However, the public school system is still under fire for high illiteracy rates, high failure rate on standardized testing, and churning out high numbers of students with no job skills. The Ministry of Education has recently announced plans to hold back students unable to pass the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT). The early feedback on the plan is mixed, as an earlier proposal using the Grade Four Literacy Test was supposed to identify children at risk of failing and provide additional instruction. Unfortunately, no additional funding or hiring of teachers has been put in place. So

while the standardized testing helps identify struggling students, they are not receiving substantive assistance to overcome their weaknesses.

¶14. (U) April 1 marks the second venture into the world of free access to essential services with the abolition of most user fees for basic health care at public medical institutions. As the first step in the process, the Government of Jamaica (GoJ) has allocated an additional J\$ 1.7 billion (approximately USD 24 million) for the first year of implementation. Time will tell whether an already strained and under-funded sector can handle the additional load without breaking.

Budget and Economy Woes

¶15. (U) Since the recent tabling of the budget in Parliament, issues of balancing debt repayment and allocating funding for key projects is in the forefront of the GoJ's focus (Ref B).

The heavy burden of debt keeps PM Golding and his Cabinet from making more improvements to the infrastructure and from implementing many reforms they would like to enact. Rising prices for most staples has led to inflation worries and made labor negotiations for public sector workers and unions more polarized than usual. Compounding the budget woes and red ink in the GoJ coffers is the national airline, Air Jamaica (Air J). Not only is the well publicized search for a private buyer a major distraction, but the struggle with labor issues caused a one-day demonstration when all Air J flight attendants called in sick which forced the cancellation of all outbound flights on March 25 (Ref C).

Soaring Crime Rates

¶16. (U) Jamaica continues its run to become the murder capital of the world. As of March 31, there has been only one period of more than 24 hours without a reported murder on the island. According to media reports the police have documented at least 350 murders since 2008 began, putting the country right on pace to equal or exceed last year's total of over 1500 people. In a recent press interview, new Commissioner Rear Admiral Hardley Lewin expressed concern at the continued high rates of major crimes and said that analysis of the numbers and potential causes was underway by the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF).

¶17. (SBU) The continuing trend of murders on a daily basis is putting severe strain on the JCF and the Ministry of National Security (MNS). When Poloff recently approached a senior technical staffer in MNS for details on anti-corruption efforts, and she complained that she was spending all her time either in meetings with high level government officials to discuss the crime rate or dealing with issues within the ministry and their reform efforts. Other senior police officers admitted that while they were trying to focus on issues such as corruption, intellectual property rights, and human trafficking, that it was hard to find enough time and resources due to the demand to deal with the murders and other serious crimes.

Election Petitions and the Slim Majority

¶18. (SBU) Another area of concern which potentially might complicate PM Golding's ability to push through some reforms is the slim majority of the JLP in Parliament. Since the JLP has only a razor-thin 32-28 majority, Golding must walk a fine line to keep all of his own party members onboard with the proposals (Ref D). He has not been able to have a cabinet of true loyalists because of the need to satisfy other elements of the party in the distribution of power and portfolios. Some of the current struggles faced by the GoJ are partially due to the lack of leadership on the part of some ministers. To date, all major reforms implemented in crime fighting and the JCF have been spearheaded by the dynamic Hardley Lewin, Commissioner of Police (Ref E).

¶9. (SBU) The JLP cause took another blow on March 29, when Supreme Court Judge Lloyd Hibbert ruled that People's National Party (PNP) Member of Parliament (MP) for East Hanover should continue to serve the people. JLP candidate Barrington Gray had challenged the vote count, filing an election petition stating that the voters were disenfranchised when ballots that were improperly torn by the presiding election officer could not be counted.

Ambassador Meets with Minister of State

¶10. (U) On March 31 Minister of State and MP Robert Montague met with Ambassador Johnson. During the meeting he revealed the JLP plans for reforms in local government and stated that his current position was established as a two-year project. After two years the responsibilities for local government will be passed on to the regional parish councils and city mayors. Among the many proposed reforms for local government are:

- Entrenching local government in the Constitution
- Implementing recommendations in the National Advisory Council 2006 report
- Strengthening accountability, transparency, and probity in the local authorities
- Developing a prototype of the ideal local authority
- Strengthening community based organizations
- Establishing a Local Parish Public Accounts Committee in all 15 parishes
- Identifying and dedicating a percentage of the national budget to local government

Analysis

¶11. (SBU) While March was not a month of big announcements or change in the GoJ, the JLP-led government continues to press forward with their reform plans. Preparing the annual budget and beginning the budget debates in Parliament is taking up most of the government's focus at the moment. At the same time, the continued rise in violent crimes, especially murders, is keeping many of the government on the defensive.

¶12. (SBU) The government is also pushing to bolster the tourism industry, which is not an easy task with the U.S. economy in a downward trend. There is a renewed focus now on attracting visitors from Canada and the EU, especially Spain, with the influx of Spanish owned resorts. However, selling foreigners on visiting Jamaica is not an easy task when the media is filled with reports of crime, murder, and corruption. Also, the one day sick-out by Air J's flight attendants which delayed the return flights of many tourists did not improve Jamaica's image either (Ref B).

¶13. (SBU) The GoJ needs to address its image and needs to continue to improve the overall quality of life here on the island. Until the crime and corruption issues begin to wane, there will always be a large segment of tourists afraid to take a chance on vacationing in Jamaica. The government also needs to rid itself of the debt ridden national airline, and hopes that a private investor can improve the image of Air J and use it to grow the tourist market locally. The JLP appear to be on the right track to improving governance in Jamaica, but whether these reforms will have staying power or long term effect is still unknown.

JOHNSON